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ABSTRACT

While institutional researchers commonly evaluate the programs and services provided by their colleges, they rarely evaluate their own effectiveness with as much gusto. If Institutional Research (IR) is to serve as the bedrock of an institution's effectiveness, it must be effective in itself and continually improving. It must make certain that the services it provides meet the needs of its customers. To this end a comprehensive Institutional Research Effectiveness Plan (IR-EP), rooted in the mission and goals of the college, was created, used, and evaluated. The results were almost as interesting as the process itself. The 5-Column Model of J. Nichols was used to create the IR-EP, and objectives were written that encapsulated what IR at this college was attempting to do to meet each goal. IR closely examined its role at the college with a focus on how people should benefit from what was done. An interview with the dean and survey of customers (college faculty and personnel) showed that IR data were used extensively at the college, but that while customers clearly understood IR reports, they wanted an increased emphasis on application and recommendation. The IR-EP, designed to promote continuous improvement, can be used to help the college carry out its mission and achieve its goals. (Author/SLD)

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THE IR-EP: A POWERFUL MODEL FOR SELF-ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING IN IR

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Abstract

While institutional researchers commonly evaluate the programs and services provided by their colleges, they rarely evaluate their own effectiveness with as much gusto. If Institutional Research is to serve as the bedrock of an institution's effectiveness, it must be effective and continually improving. It must make certain that the services it provides meet the needs of its customers. To this end, a comprehensive Institutional Research Effectiveness Plan, rooted in the mission and goals of the college, was created and utilized. The results were almost as interesting as the process itself.

Overview

The 5-Column Model, developed by James O. Nichols, is a template for measuring and promoting effectiveness. The model can be utilized at the institutional level, or applied to instructional or administrative units. It consists of five major components: 1) Mission and Goals, 2) Intended Outcomes/Objectives, 3) Means of Assessment and Criteria for Success, 4) Results, and 5) Use of Results.

Mission and Goals

The 5-Column Model was used to create an Institutional Research Effectiveness Plan (IR-EP) based on the mission and goals of the college. IR goals were derived from the college's goals. As such, IR had to determine how it related to and supported those goals. For instance, one of the college's goals was to "provide academic programs for an associate degree in the arts and sciences." IR determined that its corresponding goal was to "support the college in its endeavors to provide academic programs for an associate degree in the arts and sciences." While some college units support the mission and goals directly, through teaching and student services, IR offices are "twice removed." Nonetheless, while IR seldom serves students directly, it serves those who serve students.

Objectives

Objectives were written that encapsulated what IR was attempting to do to meet each goal. The objectives were written using outcomes-oriented language, focusing on how the receiver of IR information and services should benefit. The driving question was, how is each customer able to do her or his job better because of the information provided by IR? This customer-centered approach forced heightened accountability. IR felt increased pressure to become more responsible for the data it produced and the manner in which it shared those data with others.

IR closely examined its role at the college during this phase. The focus switched from "this is what I do" to "this is how people should benefit from what I do." For instance, an objective was crafted which stated, "The college will be well equipped to provide appropriate degree and transfer programs because of the information provided by IR." It was no longer enough to

conduct research and produce reports. The true measure of success became the degree to which individuals *used the information produced by IR to further the mission and goals of the college.*

Means of Assessment and Criteria for Success

Once objectives were established, they were operationalized. Objectives outlined a) where the data were to come from (the assessment method that would be used) and b) what would constitute acceptable performance.

IR typically utilized several assessment methods (both qualitative and quantitative) to measure its effectiveness in each area. For instance, IR determined that an interview with the Dean of Instruction would indicate the degree to which the college was equipped to provide appropriate degree and transfer programs because of the data provided by IR. IR also stated that it would receive a mean score of at least 3.0 on "the college is well equipped to offer appropriate academic programs because of the information provided by IR" on an IR customer survey.

Summary of Data Collected

Numbers were recorded for quantitative measures, while summaries were written for qualitative methods. A written report summarized the interview held with the Dean of Instruction. In short, the dean felt that IR data were used extensively to make improvements in existing academic programs, but that more visible data were needed to guide the creation of new programs at the college.

A customer survey was utilized to procure much of the quantitative data needed for the IR-EP. It was found that IR received an average rating of 3.3 (out of 4) in this area. The results of both assessment measures converged to tell the same story: IR was doing a good job in this area, but there were opportunities for improvement.

Data collection was enjoyable and educational. The value of sitting down and talking with key decision makers and leaders about the usefulness of IR data cannot be overstated. Two major revelations occurred. First, IR learned that its data were used extensively at the college. It learned, for example, that it was common practice in certain division meetings to study IR reports and use the data to improve performance in their area. Second, IR discovered that while its customers clearly understood its reports, they desired an increased emphasis on application and recommendation. As one interviewee stated, "We want you to hit us over the head with it."

Use of Results

While the data collection phase required summarization and synthesis, the final phase comprised analysis and planning. In other words, IR asked itself, what does this mean and what am I going to do about it? It was no coincidence that the IR-EP was completed in time for IR to plan its activities for the following year.

IR studied the amassed data collectively and identified strategies that would address as many areas as possible at the same time. IR discovered, for instance, that data in several parts of the

IR-EP pointed to the need for information regarding the needs of the community. As a result, a Community Needs Survey was planned. Similarly, the need for more blatantly applicable information was uncovered in several areas. As such, plans were made to hit them over the head with it during the following year.

Conclusion

The IR-EP is a cyclical progression. The amassing of data marks the beginning and not the end of the cycle. The Use of Results phase (column 5) is a planning phase. By this point, IR has done certain activities (conducted research, produced reports, etc.), assessed its effectiveness, adjusted its thinking and its priorities, and is now ready to plan its future activities in light of what it has learned.

Last but certainly not least, the ultimate purpose of the IR-EP was not performance appraisal or evaluation. While self-evaluation certainly occurred, it occurred en route to planning. The results of assessment were used by IR to make improvements in its services. **The goal of the IR-EP then, is the continuous improvement of Institutional Research, which subsequently assists the college in more successfully carrying out its mission and achieving its goals.**

References

Nichols, J.O. (1995). *A practitioner's handbook for institutional effectiveness and student outcomes assessment implementation.* New York: Agathon Press.

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